

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Luke 4:1-13 (NRSV)

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, [2] where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. [3] The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." [4] Jesus answered him, 'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.' "

[5] Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. [6] And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. [7] If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." [8] Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.' "

[9] Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, [10] for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you,'

[11] and

'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

[12] Jesus answered him, 'It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

" [13] When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

HIS TEMPTATION AND OURS

A member of our Bible study asked an intriguing question this past Wednesday. Was the temptation of Jesus different from our temptations?

At first blush the answer seems to be a definite "yes". How many of us are led by the Spirit into the wilderness? How many of us are tempted with

turning stones into bread, world domination or making a death defying leap off the nearest church spire?

I am certainly tempted but not in the way that Jesus was tempted.

Not only is the temptation of Jesus quite different from ours but the resources that Jesus had to cope with temptation seemed to be much greater than ours. To state the obvious, there is a big difference between Jesus and us. Jesus, according to the Scriptures, was not just a man. He was God in the flesh.

In the chapter that precedes this one we read about the baptism of Jesus. I assure you that it was unlike any baptism we have ever witnessed. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven proclaimed, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” (Luke 3:22)

I was baptized as a very young child, and before my baptism my father read this passage to me. I remember thinking in my childish mind, “I wonder what will happen after I am baptized. Will the Holy Spirit come down like a dove? Will I hear a voice?”

I approached that service with great expectation. But, I was disappointed. There was no heavenly dove. There was no voice from heaven. All I saw was a church leader directing me to my seat. My wide eyed wandering was obviously slowing down the rest of the service.

I understand now that I’m not a child. I’m not Jesus. There’s a radical difference between who he was and who we are. Jesus is unique. He is God’s Son and we’re not.

We can wear our “what would Jesus” do bracelet religiously. We can try to “walk in his steps” or “imitate Christ” as our ancestors in the faith have encouraged us to do. But, we will soon be discouraged in our effort. We will succumb to temptation over and over again.

And those of us who are honest about it can identify with what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) To put it another way, we’re just not the people that we

should be. We know that we have not lived up to the potential that God has given us. We fall short.

But, that's not true with Jesus. Jesus lives up to the human potential. Christ's victory over the wiles of the devil in the wilderness is a story about Jesus and not a story about us. It is a story about conquering the most extreme temptation in the worst possible environment.

OUR STORY

If we want to read a story about us, I would suggest we turn to the Old Testament and read the story of how God's people acted after the Exodus. God led them out of slavery and into freedom. And then He led them into the wilderness. He provided what they needed and guided them every step of the way.

But, the people succumbed to temptation. They doubted the goodness of God. Instead of being led by God, they were led by temptation. Fear overcame faith, and as a result their lives were plunged into idolatry.

They were forever going after other gods and seeking their own salvation. They even longed to return to Egypt and a life of slavery. Can you imagine it? They preferred the security of slavery to the adventure of following God in the wilderness.

This is our story as well. In the wilderness, we soon lose hope. We let our hungers and our fears get the best of us. We too mistrust the goodness of God.

Indeed the first temptation story in the Bible is about that very thing. The reason that Adam and Eve were tempted to eat of the forbidden fruit is because they doubted the goodness of God. They thought that God was withholding something from them that they needed.

More than that, they wanted to decide for themselves what was right and wrong. They wanted to be like gods. And throughout history men and women have made the same decision with tragic consequences.

Their story is our story. When confronted with temptation, we succumb to it. We may have the best of intentions. But, you know what road is paved with good intentions! As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (7:19, MsgB)

“I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway.” As someone once put it, “I can resist everything except temptation.” That describes the Apostle Paul, and that describes us as well.

And then a few verses down the Apostle exclaims in despair, “I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?” Romans 7:24 (MsgB)

There is someone who can do something for us when we're at the end of our rope. There is a radical difference between Jesus and us and understanding that fact is the first step we need to take if we are to be saved.

If we do not understand that, we turn the good news into good advice. Instead of talking about grace and forgiveness, we trivialize the gospel. We do not take sin and temptation seriously enough, and we overestimate our own abilities.

Jesus is not just our friend, example or teacher. Jesus is first and foremost our Savior.

And that's what we need. We need someone who has conquered sin and death. We need someone who has stood up to the devil and said “no”. We need someone who is brave enough to stand up to the evil in this world and name it for what it is. We need someone who understands our weaknesses and yet is not subject to them.

And we need someone who will keep us from going down the path of temptation and will deliver us from evil. In Jesus we have that someone. In Jesus, we have that Savior.

TRULY HUMAN AND TRULY DIVINE

When we talk about Jesus in the church, we say that he was “truly human” and “truly divine.” How can that be?

Let’s think about this way. In Jesus we see the human face of God, and in Jesus we see what it means to be an authentic human being.

An important passage for understanding the unique nature of Jesus, sin and temptation is found in the New Testament book of Hebrews. In that book we read,

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.” Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)

Jesus was like us in every way. He shared our joys and our sorrows and our emotions. He was subject to the weaknesses of mortal flesh. In Jesus we do not see a God who is removed from the struggle of life. In Jesus we see a God who participates in that struggle.

But, according to this passage, there was one important difference between Jesus and us. He did not sin. Jesus is the only human being who remained faithful to God in all things and in all ways. Jesus showed us what perfect humanity looks like in a sinful world, and in doing that He brought a hope into this world, a hope that will not be conquered by the voice of evil.

When we look at a human life without sin, we clearly see Divinity.

And that’s what our lesson for today is all about. It is not just a story about a temptation that occurred long ago in a remote place. It is a story about how the Beloved, the Chosen One, the Son of God was able to do what no human being has been able to do before or since ... overcome temptation.

NEW CREATION

We, of course, cannot do what only God’s Son could do. Jesus maintained a fidelity to God that we cannot imitate perfectly. Jesus sought the will of God in every situation, and that is what made him sinless.

But, in Christ we also learn that we are no longer imprisoned by the temptations and sins of the past. Our story can have a different ending. Quite often after our confession of sin I use 2 Corinthians 5:17 as a declaration of pardon. It goes, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

This means that in Christ not only are our sins forgiven; we are also given a new nature. We are no longer slaves to sin but are free to love God and live in ways that are in line with God’s purposes.

We are enabled to seek God’s will instead of being trapped by our own worst instincts. By the power of God’s salvation in Christ Jesus, we too have the ability to be faithful to the high calling and hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

We too can say “no” to the devil’s appeal to our selfishness and “yes” to God’s will for our life. We are given the ability to resist temptation

Now don’t misunderstand. We are not and never will be sinless. We have and we will succumb to temptation.

But, despite our failures, we do not have to give in to despair. Defeat is not a foregone conclusion. We are not slaves to guilt. We have hope for a new life because in Jesus we are a new creation. We have been given a new lease on life.

Jesus unmask the idolatries and temptations of our society. Jesus enables us to see the evil that masquerades as good common sense.

When temptation comes our way, we believe that, by the grace of God, the outcome of the struggle can go God’s way instead of the devil’s way. The hope that is ours in Christ Jesus will not allow our lives to be determined by the defeats of the past. Each new encounter with evil and temptation can be an opportunity to display the power and glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

One of the reasons that people keep making the same old mistakes and succumbing to the same old temptations is that they have believed the devil’s lie. The devil’s lie is this. The devil tells us, “You can’t change. You can’t

make any other choice. You have failed in the past, and you will fail in the future. Circumstances require you to be realistic. Just do what is necessary to make ends meet today. Just struggle for your daily bread and forget about the future.”

In that sense, the story of the temptation is not just about what happened to Jesus long ago. It is about what happens to us each and every day. The struggle for daily bread, the struggle to make a living in this rock filled wilderness consumes all our attention. And soon that grind takes its toll. We become so much a part of our job that we forget that we are God’s children. We forget that we are meant for more than just making bricks for the local Pharaoh.

TEMPTATION BASED ON DOUBT

Notice how the devil poses his first temptation. “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” The real temptation is not found in the act of turning a stone into bread. The real temptation is found in the premise for this minor miracle. The real temptation is found in that little preposition “if”.

Do you see how temptation works? It is based upon doubt. The devil wants Jesus to think, “Maybe I’m not God’s Son. This could be just one big delusion. Maybe I should focus on my own needs instead of always worrying about the kingdom.”

The devil uses the very same tactic with us. He asks us, “So you think that God is going to provide for you? Do you really believe that? Don’t you know that God helps those who help themselves? Just worry about your next meal and forget all this kingdom of God stuff.”

And if we succumb to that temptation, all we can worry about is turning stones into bread. All we worry about is filling our lives with the necessities of life. And one day we will wake up with a room full of bread and a heart that is empty. As I said last week, we will have a hunger that even the blue plate special won’t be able to fill.

Jesus told us that our priorities should be just the opposite. He told us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these other things would be added to us. Don't get bogged down with bread and making a living. It's more important to have a life. Jesus, as he does in all three of the temptations that the devil poses, rejects temptation by quoting Scripture. Scripture is the sword of the Spirit that cuts the devil down to size.

He said, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" And the rest of that verse goes, "but by every word coming from the mouth of God."

The most recent word from God was a word from heaven indicating that Jesus' way would be a way of suffering. He would be the suffering servant of God. Focusing on bread alone would keep him from doing God's will.

And the same is true for us. Focusing on bread alone will prevent us from seeking the kingdom. The first and most basic temptation is to limit our lives to the pursuit of pleasure.

A brief examination of the modern world suggests that many are succumbing to this temptation. But, believe me. What happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas. The pursuit of pleasure as a way of life is hollow and destructive. The pursuit of pleasure as an ultimate goal destroys lives. It is a deadly temptation.

THE TEMPTATION OF POWER

In a way these temptations are related. If we focus only on our own needs and keeping our "bread", then we want to make sure that no one else can get what is rightfully ours. We will emphasize political and military might to keep us "safe".

Again, this is based upon a mistrust of God's protection and provision. If we do not think that God will protect us then we will need ever larger armies and spend more of our money toward that end.

The people of Jesus' day thought that the Messiah would be a political and military leader, and the temptation of the devil for Jesus is the temptation to follow that very path. The devil said,

“Give the people what they want Jesus. With your power all the kingdoms of the earth can be under your control. Just do it my way instead of God’s way.”

Throughout the history of God’s people we can see this same temptation at work. In the Old Testament the people were forever trusting in foreign alliances and corrupt kings instead of the protection of God.

And their attempts to secure their own future through military and political means always made them less safe. The disasters that befell God’s people in the Old Testament were always the result of trusting political and military power instead of God’s power.

Over and over again the people suffered defeat because of their lack of faith, but they would not learn the lesson. They still desired a military solution. They still worshipped power and might, and they wanted a Messiah who would lead them in that direction.

And the Bible tells us, in doing that, they were worshipping the devil. They were falling down at the feet of the devil in an attempt to gain earthly glory.

Jesus refused to give in to this temptation to power. He said “no” to the devil and his temptation. Once again Jesus quoted Scripture. “Jesus answered him, 'It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' ”(Luke 4:8, NRSV)

What kind of political leaders do we elect? Do we desire Messiahs who promise to keep us safe through the use of military might and political power? Henri Nouwen in an article on temptation wrote,

"The ... most seductive temptation to which Jesus was subjected is the temptation to acquire power. The devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms and their splendor and said, 'I will give you all these, if you fall at my feet and worship me' (Matthew 4:8-9).

There is probably no culture in which people are so unabashedly encouraged to seek power as ours.... In this country of pioneers and self-made people, in

which ambition is praised from the first moment we enter school until we enter the competitive world of free enterprise, we cannot imagine that any good can come from giving up power or not even desiring it."

And yet that is exactly what God in Christ is calling us to do. Jesus did not come to dominate the world. Jesus came to save the world.

And he calls us to join the cause, to go into the whole world with a message of forgiveness and grace. It is this that will bring us true security. Anything else just might be the temptation of the devil.

THE TEMPTATION OF FALSE RELIGION

So, we have the temptation of materialism, the temptation of power and finally we have the most deadly temptation of all, the temptation of false religion.

In this last temptation we learn that the devil is a theologian. The devil is seminary trained! He can quote Scripture too.

He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and double dares him to jump off. Why would Jesus do this?

This would be a sign that Jesus is who he says he is. If he performs such a death defying feat, it would be a fulfillment of prophecy. After all didn't Psalm 91 say that God would always protect his servant, that angels would come and bear him up lest he strike his foot against the stone?

Notice that Jesus is again being tempted to be a Messiah who abandons the way of the suffering servant. How much better it would be to do something spectacular instead of something hard!

But, Jesus suggests that the devil is quoting Scripture out of context. The Scripture also says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

For many of us religion is a test. We are forever putting out the fleece. We are forever testing God, and the measure of God's faithfulness is how often He saves our bacon. Our faith is based upon getting what we want and being

delivered from our trials. If God gives us what we want, if God lets us score the touchdown, we point heavenward and give Him the glory.

One commentator put it this way,

“Sometimes people are angry at God because in their minds God did not come through a test that they had set up. The test they devise might run something like this: If my husband is healed of cancer, then I'll know God loves me. If my boy comes back safely from an overseas mission, then I'll know God is on my side. If I get the job that I've been praying for, then I'll know that God cares about me.

But what if the husband dies of cancer? What if the boy is killed overseas? What if the job that I pray for goes to someone else? Will I still love and serve God regardless of the outcome? Will I walk with God whether or not I get that job, whether or not that cancer is healed, whether or not my loved one pulls through a life-threatening situation?

Or, am I going to put God to a test and say, If you do this for me, then you're my God, but if not, I will have nothing to do with you. The Spirit-filled life which Jesus lived was a life that was unconditionally surrendered to God regardless of the outcome.”

Jesus knew that sometimes God requires us to go into the wilderness and endure severe trials. Sometimes, perhaps always, true faith comes not on the road to success but on the road to Jerusalem and the way of the cross.

Again, we don't want to hear that. We want a religion based solely upon comforting angels and the assurance that God is always willing to do what we want Him to do ... if only we have enough faith.

But, Jesus says, “That's not faith. That's putting God to the test. That's remaking God in our own image. That's replacing the divine with the spectacular.”

When I look at the modern church, once again I see this as a real problem. The divine has been replaced by the spectacular and the way of the cross has been replaced by the power of positive thinking. We have sold the birthright of salvation for a sorry porridge of sound and fury.

The temptations of Jesus were quite different from our temptations in some ways.

But, I think we have seen that these three temptations expose the basis, the core reason for our temptations. In revealing the true motives of the devil in this encounter, Jesus enables us to evaluate the claims of evil as they come to us today and choose wisely.

The story of Jesus saying “no” to the devil can be our story.

Temptation can be defeated in our wilderness too.